

Exploring the capacity of Nigerian undergraduates in academic writing

BY

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Abstract

The study examines the capacity of Nigerian undergraduates in academic writing and its attendant impact on their capability to be future scholarly publishers of research findings. It explores the factors that hinder students from engaging in academic writing such as their degree of motivation, ability to research and apply knowledge across several contexts of perception on academic writing, self-efficacy and ability to write. It focuses on finding out the level at which students are versed in academic writing, possible ways of motivating undergraduates to be involved in academic writing in order to strengthen their interest to become scholarly publishers of research findings that will expand the frontiers of knowledge. Four research questions were raised to guide the study. A purposive sampling technique was adopted to select 500 respondents across tertiary institutions in Nigeria through a self-structured questionnaire titled ETCOUIAW with the co-efficient alpha level of .75. A 4-point likert scale was used to elicit data from the respondents. The findings revealed that students are not fully aware of international standards in academic writing. Few of the students can discern academic articles. However, most students who have once engaged in academic writing do not bother to continue their research work after a rigorous peer review which is very likely based on their level of perception, literacy, degree of motivation and self-efficacy. It is therefore recommended that students should be motivated to attend conferences, workshops, seminars on academic writing as well as network with other academia with the help of improving interest in research exercise, critical and analytical thinking; intellectual development; good communication and writing skills and for the benefit of the society at large.

Keywords: Academic writing* Undergraduates* Research* Peer review* Tertiary institutions

Introduction

Overtime, teachers and educators have continued to emphasize and motivate the students only to pursue the classroom tasks of upgrading their cumulative grade point average either as a reward to satisfying their (students) personal need or needs of parents or guardian. Despite the efforts of teachers in preparing the students for the now and futuristic challenges through contents and methods. The fact that an average tertiary student is not conscious of and does not internalize or explore around academic writing has been a major concern. Thus, even students show lackadaisical attitude in paying more attention to detail on different tasks given to them like assignments, group work, presentation, research amongst and to able to carry out these tasks independently have generated issues of graduate students not meeting the requirements of the field they seem to pursue a career.

Ukwuoma (2014) noted that writing is a lifelong activity because as one writes in a particular way for a given subject, one also learns about making sense of the subject. Academic writing is any writing activity carried out for the purpose of achieving an academic task. Thus, academic writing influences beneficial roles to the students' needs so that it should be developed in formal instructional

settings at tertiary education. Academic writing is also seen as structured research written by scholars for usage by other scholars. Academic writing is an important aspect of formal tertiary education. Students of higher institutions are expected to engage in academic writing in various forms.

To facilitate a change in perspective, first-year university undergraduates should accept writing and reading like any other lifelong activity, which requires time to attain proficiency (Ukwuoma, 2014). Conversely, high school teachers should vary their teaching to lay the necessary rudiments for students to learn how to write in specific disciplines when they become university undergraduates. According to Murray and Moore (2009), many first-year university undergraduates spend lots of time reading but struggle when it comes to putting their ideas on paper. To encourage students in their writing journey, university teachers and literacy professionals should inform students that academic writing does not mean a finished written work because it includes the mistakes, they make in the writing process.

Students should be able to advance in their proficiency in English language as a lack of it constitutes a major setback for learners to be able to dispense fully in academic writing. It is

important to know that students should continue to revisit (without any form of pride) to learning the basic English tenses, punctuations, parts of speech, etc. to improve literacy skills.

Based on the above, university teachers have important roles to play in this respect because the way a teacher delivers his or her subject matter will promote learning or make it deficient. As a result, academic writing plays a germane role for students in undergraduate programs. University undergraduates in Nigerian universities are not different from their peers around the world in being frustrated with academic writing. A lot of researchers have found that university graduates lack the knowledge, skills, and expertise of academic writing. Indeed, students enter universities as if they are not familiar to any form of academic writing, hence, unable to tackle the rigors of academic writing. Majority of first-year university undergraduates consider writing a difficult task and often grapple with how to get started with their writing. Academic writing contributes pertinent roles for students' academic purposes; papers, exercise, assignments and dissertations for meeting their academic needs. Thus, students must possess some skills of writing such as organizing words in a sentence, developing ideas in a paragraph, using proper grammar and punctuation to compose their writing.

As such, university teachers have important roles to play in this respect because the way a teacher delivers his or her subject matter will promote learning or make it deficient. As a result, academic writing plays a germane role for students in undergraduate programs. University undergraduates in Nigerian universities are not different from their peers around the world in being frustrated with academic writing. As such, Ukwuoma (2014) implored teachers in universities in Africa, most especially Nigeria to integrate writing and reading instruction into content areas. On the other hand, students should accept the idea that learning how to write requires patience, commitment, persistence and dedication. Hence, a full understanding of the discourse of one's discipline is a continuing factor to be self-reliant and independent in academic works.

Students also struggle with understanding the purpose of the different stages of writing such as planning, introduction, paragraph development and use of connectives, conclusion, proof-reading, and editing. It is important for students to make out time for initial planning before they embark on the actual writing. They should also consider planning, drafting, redrafting, editing, and the final write-up as part of an iterative and recursive process in writing. This is particularly important because it has been noted that "your

writing can be a companion to your learning rather than an imposing enemy” (Murray & Moore, 2009, p. 5). Working as part of a group or pair can also motivate students to see the fun in academic writing, which is rewarding and worthwhile. Irrespective of how difficult academic writing is, students should understand that the journey to becoming a writer is an important journey.

Academic writing is a journey that leads us to “many new discoveries about ourselves, about our ideas, about the world in which we live and about our professional identities as academics, teachers, researchers and scholars” (Murray & Moore, 2009, p. 4). Soles (2010) has mentioned the distinctive features of academic writing with the acronym “ISCE” which refers to “intelligence, substance, clarity and energy”. An academic essay possesses “intelligence” if it contains insightful ideas and cites authoritative source, “substance”, if ideas are fully detailed providing the reader with adequate information; “clarity”, if the “grammar, sentence structure, organization, punctuation, and diction are sound”, and “energy” “when the writer uses a strong and confident voice in a fluid and vigorous style.” Furthermore, students should enjoy academic writing so it can be meaningful to them (Crème & Lea, 2008).

There have been speculations by scholars and researchers that university undergraduates in Africa lack the knowledge, skills, and expertise of academic writing. Indeed, students enter universities as if they have not been exposed to any form of academic writing, hence, unable to tackle the rigors of academic writing. The majority of university undergraduates consider writing a difficult task and often grapple with how to get started with their writing. In light of the foregoing that this paper will examine the capacity of Nigerian undergraduates in academic writing and its attendant impact on their capability to be future scholarly publishers of research findings. Hence, the study seeks to provide answers to the following questions that are raised to guide this study: (i) what are the factors that hinder students from partaking in academic writing? (ii) at what level are students versed in academic writing? (iii) what benefit can undergraduates derive by involving in academic writing? (iii) how can students be motivated to be fully involved in academic writing?

Methods

A study adopted a descriptive design and purposive sampling technique was adopted to select 500 respondents across tertiary institutions in Nigeria through a self-structured questionnaire titled ETCOUIAW with the coefficient alpha level of .75. A 4-point likert

scale was used to elicit data from the respondents. The questionnaires were admitted on the respondents through Google form. The demographic data of the respondents were analyzed using simple percentage, frequency,

valid percent and cumulative percent. The research questions were analyzed based on mean and standard deviation with the use of statistical product and service solution (SPSS).

Table 1.0 Demographic Data of Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	188	37.6	37.6	37.6
Female	312	62.4	62.4	62.4
Total	500	100	100	100
Tertiary Institution				
University	405	81	81	100
College of Education	52	10.4	10.4	19
Polytechnic	43	8.6	8.6	8.6
Monotechnic	0	0	0	0
Total	500	100	100	

The table 1.0 above shows that 188 males and 312 females participated in the study. Hence, females were the major participants. Also, based on the tertiary institution of the respondents, 405 students in the university

participated in the study, 52 students in the Colleges of Education and 43 students in the Polytechnic. Therefore, the University students were the majority of the respondents.

Analyses of Research Questions

Table 1.1 Research Questions 1: Mean and standard deviation on the factors that hinder students from partaking in academic writing

S/N	Item	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1.	I am aware of different local and international publication standards	500	3.22	.855
2.	I can easily discern different types of research articles	500	3.02	.901
3.	I have published at least one research article	500	2.41	.992
4.	It is easier for me to collaborate with peers/ lecturers	500	3.38	.785
5.	I do not bother to continue with my research work after a rigorous peer review	500	2.55	.908

Table 1.1. above indicated the factors that hinder students from partaking in academic writing. Item 1 showed the level of students' awareness of local and international publication standards and had the mean score of 3.22 (SD= .855) followed by Item 2 that showed the level to which students can discern different types of research articles had the mean score of 3.02

(SD= .901). However, Item 3 had a higher standard deviation of .992. This means that the students had much different reactions to Item 3. For the fact that Item 4 (SD= .785) had a lower standard deviation compared to other Items in the table, it was clearly seen that the students had a more consistent reaction.

Table 1.2 Research Question 2: Mean and standard deviation of the level to which students are versed in academic writing

S/N	Item	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1.	Level of Perception	500	3.32	.626
2.	Literacy	500	2.85	.892
3.	Student-lecturer relationship	500	2.98	.875
4.	Self-efficacy	500	3.24	.763
5.	Level of motivation	500	3.34	.706

Table 1.2 above showed the level at which students are versed in academic writing. Item 5 had the highest mean score of 3.34 and followed by Item 1 with mean score of 3.32. The two items had a mean difference of 0.02 with a high level of closeness. Item 2 had the highest standard deviation of .892. The students are of different opinions to literacy as a

contributing factor in making students to be fully involved in academic writing. The spread of literacy score after student awareness level got wider. It is because the Item 1 had the lowest standard deviation proved that the students were more persistent with their response.

Table 1.3 Research Question 3: Mean and standard deviation of the benefits can Undergraduates derive by involving in academic writing

S/N	Item	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1.	Intellectual development	500	3.69	.523
2.	Partial communication	500	2.92	.940
3.	Social exposure	500	3.43	.768
4.	Critical and analytical thinking	500	3.55	.707
5.	Restricts writing skills	500	2.69	1.147

The table above showed the benefits that Undergraduates derive by involving in academic writing. Item 1 with the mean score 3.69 ranked 1st on the table for intellectual

development which students enjoy from academic writing. Item 4 with the mean score 3.55 ranked second on the table showing critical and analytical thinking as major skills

that are relevant to students' achievement by participating in academic writing. The lowest mean score is Item 5 which had the mean score of 2.69 which stated that academic writing

restricts writings skills. The standard deviation of all Items indicated that the students' reactions are more spread out.

Table 1.4 Research Question 4: Mean and standard deviation on the strategies to motivate students to be fully involved in academic writing?

S/N	Item	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1.	Attending conferences/ workshops	500	3.35	.923
2.	Organizing seminars	500	3.50	.689
3.	Peer review bias	500	2.89	1.055
4.	Building a cordial relationship with academia	500	3.50	.712
5.	Scolding	500	2.15	1.177

The table above shows the methods to encourage students to be fully involved in academic writing. Item 5 (mean =2.15) and Item 3 (mean = 2.89) had a larger standard deviation of 1.177 and 1.055 respectively. This shows that the students had much different reactions that peer review bias and scolding would encourage student complete participation in academic writing. Item 4 and Item 2 had the same mean score. This means that both ways i.e., organizing seminars and building a cordial relationship with academia worked the same for encouraging average inclusion in academic writing. However, Item 2 with the standard deviation .689 revealed that the students had a more consistent reception and cluttered to the mean.

Discussion of Findings

The study revealed that students are getting interested in the knowledge of different types of academic journals. They found it easy to collaborate with either of their peers or lecturers, and for this to achieve meaning

results, such guide should provide meaningful mentoring and constructive feedback. This corroborates the work of Ukwuoma (2014) who implored teachers in universities in Africa, most especially Nigeria to integrate writing and reading instruction into content areas. The study revealed that the student's level of awareness about being versed in academic factor strongly depends on their level of perceptions. However, they see a need to be motivated to reach their full potentials. This advances the work of Murray and Moore (2009) who found out that many first-year university undergraduates spend lots of time reading but struggle when it comes to putting their ideas on paper. Findings show that benefits of students' active participation in academic writing will increase their intellectual development, social exposure and critical and analytical skills. This is in line with Soles (2010) who mentioned the distinctive features of academic writing with the acronym "ISCE" which refers to "intelligence, substance, clarity and energy." From the findings of the study, organizing seminars, attending conferences,

building cordial relationships with academic and not scolding or peer review bias are ways to encourage students' complete inclusion in academic writing. It supports the work of Crème & Lea (2008) who state that students should enjoy academic writing so it can be meaningful to them.

Conclusions

The undergraduates' low proficiency and participation in academic writing is a problem that can be provided with solutions. Exposing and orientating undergraduates to academic writing at all levels while in the university could avail students' opportunities to get re-acquainted with the necessary skills needed. Though, academic writing may be an activity which students are required to engage in and across the curriculum, the respective tutors in the various other subjects may not have the time, experience or specialization with which to assist the students. A useful technique is to expose the undergraduates to academic writing every session, except the final year, when they write degree dissertations.

References

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Recommendations

- Students should be motivated to attend conferences, workshops, seminars on academic writing, as well as network with other academia with the help of improving interest in research exercise, critical and analytical thinking, intellectual development, good communication and writing skills and for the benefit of the society at large.
- Academic writing could be taught as a course unit beyond the entry level. Academic writing is linked to research, which requires sound academic writing skills. The creation of support services within the tertiary educational system should be a viable initiative. Such support services include relevant websites, blogs, ICT facilities, research guidance units and social media to ease students' access to researchers and relevant materials.

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